Words make a difference: The influence of language on public perception

Recently I was involved with a team of authors who completed work on a major revision of the glossary for the field of developmental education and learning assistance (Arendale and others, in press). There were a number of major changes from the original edition (Rubin, 1991). The language contained within a basic glossary for a field in education not only reflects its past and current practice, it also guides the future direction of the work (Arendale, 2005, 2006). Careful consideration of language creates an environment to transform the field's work and redefine its essential role within postsecondary education. Sometimes powerful impacts are created without intention. This article explores that issue. The term "developmental education" has been used by many to describe the field in U.S. postsecondary education that serves the needs of students who are often academically underprepared for the rigor of college courses. Another popular term employed is "learning assistance." It is not surprising that the two largest professional associations that represent faculty and staff members who work in programs or teach classes related to this area have incorporated those terms into their names: the National Association for Developmental Education (NADE) and the College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA). In addition to these two aforementioned terms, "remedial education" is used at the national level by the U.S. Department of Education to describe the same approximate area of higher education. The common practice illustrated by the language used in professional publications and conference presentations has been to categorize and name the students served by the field as "developmental students" or "remedial students." There is no evidence that professionals who work in this field intended any negative labeling of the students that were so designated, but the result has been the same. The facts do not support this commonly held perception. Review of statistics from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES; 2003) have consistently reported that most students who enroll in a remedial or developmental-level course only do so in one academic area, such as English, mathematics, reading, or writing. Professionals who serve in the field know this intuitively as well. For them, talking about developmental students and remedial students is quick shorthand for expressing what these direct service providers understand to be a more complex truth.

One of the unanticipated and unfortunate results of this language use has often been a stigma for the students served by developmental education programs. Although the language is acceptable and even understood within the developmental education community, it is misunderstood within the wider community in education or by the wider public. Students, parents, and policymakers hear the same phrases—developmental student or remedial student—and come to quite different perceptions. The students who are labeled as developmental or remedial often report feelings of stigma and shame for being identified in this fashion. This generates notions of general inadequacy that can lead to academic difficulty or failure in other academic disciplines for which they are well prepared academically (Pedelty, 2001; Schmidt, et al., 2005).

Parents become frustrated at the labeling of these young people as academically inadequate and are tempted to blame the secondary school system for insufficient education or the children themselves for lack of effort. Policymakers at U.S. postsecondary institutions can be misled by the labeling of these students and assume that their lack of academic preparation extends to all dimensions. This encourages them to deny admission to the institution because the students are viewed as a lost cause and a poor investment of scarce resources.

The categorization of students by labeling them "developmental" or "remedial" is factually inaccurate, as demonstrated by the NCES, a subsidiary of the U.S. Department of Education. The consequence for this decision has led to stigma and shame for students and parents. It indirectly leads to loss of

institutional priority and resources for a group of students whom some policymakers believe are hopelessly deficient regardless of interventions and programs. Finally, it is debilitating for the students because it can influence them to lose confidence in themselves and create a self-fulfilling prophesy where they experience academic difficulty or failure in academic disciplines in which they were academically prepared to achieve and excel.

The authors of the new glossary described at the beginning of this article made a number of strategic choices with the new edition. One of those was encouraged by the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA; 2001), which admonishes that language used to describe people be structured with the person first, followed by a descriptive phrase (pp. 63-65, 69-70). The new glossary includes usage rules with key entries on how the words should be used in publications (Arendale and others, in press). For "remedial students" the usage rule was ". . . a student with remedial issues in fundamentals of mathematics." Under the entry for "developmental student" the usage rule provided an example ". . . a student with developmental issues in algebra." An entire new entry was created for "academically underprepared student:"

1: a student assessed as having potential for college success when appropriate educational enrichment and support services are provided. 2: a student who, while meeting college admissions requirements, is not yet fully prepared to succeed in one or more college-level courses. USAGE RULE: Put people first followed by a descriptive phrase. EXAMPLE: " . . a student with academically underpreparedness issues." (Arendale and Others, in press)

In all three glossary entries, the usage rule provided a level of academic preparedness. The progression began with a student having an issue in fundamentals of mathematics, college algebra, and finally calculus. Another element was to focus the student need in a particular academic discipline. With these examples, the focus was in mathematics.

The question for you as the reader is whether the change in word usage is important. Is the phrase "developmental student" the same as "a student with developmental needs in college algebra"? It has become common practice to replace "disabled or handicapped student" with the phrase "students with a disability." This presents such a dramatically different perception of the capabilities of the students. The authors of the revised glossary advocate that correct language usage is critical for conversation both within the developmental education community, as well as with the larger community of students, parents, and policymakers.

What will be the results if the faculty and staff members in the field of developmental education and learning assistance carefully and consistently follow this usage rule? Can a nuanced change of words make a difference to students, parents, and policymakers? Changing public perception with any concept or idea is difficult. Inaccurate prior information, memories, and prejudices are difficult challenges to overcome. The struggles within U.S. society concerning racial stereotyping, religious strife, and bigotry continue. As a historian, I see positive results for society when the majority becomes intolerant of language that categorizes and demeans people. The language usage changes described in the new glossary for developmental education and learning assistance provide another step to building a better and more productive society for all citizens.

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